

This Week in Congress

December 18, 2006

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this useful.

Meeting with Cuban Government and Trade Officials

This week, I traveled with nine other Members of Congress to meet with officials in Cuba. The trip comes at a unique time as the health of Cuban leader Fidel Castro continues to be in question. Under Castro's dictatorship, this country has remained a communist state for 47 years. During this time, our foreign policy has centered on unilateral sanctions and isolating Cuba.

I have long fought for the ability of farmers and ranchers to be able to sell their products to Cuba. In 2000, I successfully helped open the door to agriculture trade with Cuba. The passage of H.R. 4461 allowed for the export of agriculture products to Cuba for the first time in 38 years. From December 2001 to April 2006, this market opening led to Cuba purchasing nearly \$1.25 billion of U.S. food and farm commodities. However, due to greater restrictions by the U.S. government in recent years, the export of U.S. commodities has once again decreased.

While in Cuba, I met with high-ranking government, trade and religious leaders, including a visit with the Catholic Cardinal of Cuba concerning the lives of Cubans. My visit helped me gain a better understanding of the political situation in Cuba. It also opens the door to explore further opportunities to export U.S. agriculture commodities and pursue policies that improve the lives of the Cuban people. My ultimate hope is that these meetings help establish a framework for our countries' relations during this time of transition.

Veterans: Increasing Mental Health Care Access and Resolving Claims Backlog

Last week, Congress approved the Veterans Benefits, Health Care and Information Technology Act, which included provisions of a bill I introduced to give veterans access to a full range of qualified mental health providers, including Licensed Professional Counselors and Marriage and Family Therapists. Previously, only privately insured individuals and active duty personnel - not veterans - had access to this care. With the growing number of veterans seeking mental health services after returning from combat overseas, I am pleased that Congress acted to recognize these practitioners to help veterans access the right care.

The benefits bill also authorizes additional funding for more blind rehabilitation specialists, strengthens support for homeless veterans and increases reimbursements for seriously disabled veterans living in state veterans homes. For rural veterans, the legislation creates a VA Office of Rural Health and allows veterans to access long term care closer to home by making non-VA facilities, such as community hospitals, eligible for state veterans home payments.

Also this week, I helped lead more than 60 Members of Congress in asking the President to address the increasing backlog of pending veterans' claims in his upcoming federal budget proposal. Since last year, the number of pending compensation and pension claims has increased 17 percent. The letter encourages the Administration to provide funding for the staff and resources needed to overcome the backlog and delays. The hardship experienced by many veterans and their families waiting to have their claim processed is unacceptable. They deserve timely, accurate and consistent decisions from the VA.

Continuing My Eleventh Annual Big First Listening Tour

This was the first week of my eleventh annual Big First Listening Tour. I spent time in Elkhart, Johnson, Syracuse, Tribune, Goodland, St. Francis, Atwood, Colby and Beloit. Also while I was in Elkhart, I stopped at Morton County Health System Facility to meet with CEO Leonard Hernandez. I enjoyed visiting with patients and staff and seeing the facility's new CAT Scan and 20-bed Dementia Unit. While in Beloit, I stopped at St. John's Catholic School to speak to about 30 senior government students.

Tomorrow, I will be in Lyons in Rice County, Turon in Reno County, Stafford in Stafford County and Ellinwood in Barton County. On Wednesday, I will be in Gove in Gove County, Healy in Lane County and Collyer in Trego County. On Thursday, my stops will include Medicine Lodge in Barber County, Protection in Comanche County, Ashland in Clark County and Bucklin in Ford County. I will stop in Haviland in Kiowa County and Pratt in Pratt County on Friday. On Saturday, I will be in Palco in Rooks County. [Click here](#) for specific times and locations, as well as to view my tour schedule through the beginning of January when Congress is scheduled to reconvene.

In the Office

Miranda McCloud of Lyons was in Washington, D.C., this week participating in the Congressional Youth Leadership Council's educational program. Harry Watts of Manhattan and Terry Holdren of Topeka were in with Kansas Farm Bureau to visit about the upcoming farm bill. Patrick Doran, Eric Haar and Laura Maag Lutz were in with FHLBank of Topeka to visit about their projects in the First District. FHLBank Topeka provides funding to financial institutions in Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska and Oklahoma to help lenders make housing, economic development and small business loans.

Very truly yours,

Jerry